

Long walk to Freedom (a reading)

Autobiography by Nelson Mandela, former president of the Republic of South Africa

Submitted by Maya Alkateb, 3rd-year student at the Political Sciences Faculty, 2008

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In a world where barriers keep falling apart and people come closer, heroes and champions keep emerging, role models to be emulated by freedom-seekers everywhere. In view of the oppression that prevailed in South Africa over long decades past, the current harmony among different ethnicities is an experience worth examining and study. Nelson Mandela's book "Long Walk to Freedom" acquaints the world with part of this experience and, accordingly, calls on its peoples to translate their true freedom into action, almost the same way the African National Congress (ANC)—Mandela's party—does. The ANC struggled long to secure freedom for all South Africans, not for one ethnicity at the cost of another. Mr Mandela leads on the following premise, "Freedom is indivisible; the chains on any one of my people were the chains on all of them, the chains on all of my people were the chains on me." The hangman and the prisoner are both victims of injustice. Freeing both is a necessity.

When assuming the presidency of South Africa, Mr Mandela tells the people in his speech that he is an ordinary man like any other, only extraordinary circumstances he lived through led to his current state. "Long Walk to Freedom" awakened the Mandela within me through the idea of the inner potential in every one of us that is waiting to be put to use in the right conditions. A Mandela must be awakened inside every man until we each reach the end of our long walk to freedom.

In what follows is an analytical reading of Mr Mandela's story and how we can benefit from it:

- A Leader in the Making

Mandela was neither born in a wealthy environment, nor was he of the privileged. He had to strive tirelessly to push his way. He was born in 1918 in a humble village of the Transkei country. His father was the village chief, but the young Nelson was forced to leave his village and family at an early age—when his father died—at the behest of his mother who wanted to secure a better

future for him. This was such a crucial experience that contributed to the formation of his character and his set of values. In his book he mentions how the democratic nature of the local community had a lasting influence on him as he describes the tribal meetings held at the regent's house in Mqhekezweni, where he was living at the time: "The foundation of self-government was that all men were free to voice their opinions and equal in their value as citizens." Mandela was unruly, to some extent, in his youth; he mentions how he ran away with a friend when the regent arranged for them marriages against their will, and how they started looking for a job at the coalmines in the suburbs of Johannesburg. Mandela had the financial means for education in his youth, he got his BA and moved to Johannesburg to work as a lawyer at a law office he and his friend, Oliver, had opened, mainly to defend Africans whose voices would have been otherwise unheard in courts.

Mandela was brought up in a traditional environment that idolises the white man simply because of his different skin colour, an abstraction considerably blended with tradition, to the extent that Mandela used to conceive of himself as totally free in his early years. However, with time, his eyes were opened to his African people's suffering under the Apartheid regime, and his resolve to defend them and secure their freedom started to grow until it became the centrepiece of his life.

The spirit of challenge stood out in Mandela since early childhood, and he learned to be open-minded and tolerant of the ideas of others. With days grew his awareness of the discriminatory practices against his people in South Africa, starting with the Bantu Self-Government Act, which established so-called "Homelands" for ten different black groups, in accordance with the "divide-and-rule" tradition, not to mention the rampant social, legal and political discrimination against Africans.

- Mandela's Struggle

Of his own free will, Mandela engaged in the political struggle through the ANC. This party is unique in that it admits to its membership whites and coloureds along with Africans, and believes in political equality as the only solution.

Mandela became an active member of the party ever since he joined it. He contributed to the formation of the ANC Youth League and organised a number of strikes. He became First Deputy President of the party at age 34. Mandela was a party member all along while he worked at a law office, but the evolution of his political life forced him to live as a fugitive and made of him a popular hero. From his hiding place, he wrote in a statement to the press in 1961: "For my own part I have made my choice. I will not leave South Africa, nor will I surrender... I will continue fighting until the end of my days." Indeed, he did not surrender, nevertheless, the government authorities eventually arrested him and his comrades, and a period of protracted trials started.

The trials Mr Mandela and his comrades went on were endurance contests more than being instruments of justice. These trials would go on for years, and the government would present a huge bulk of evidence and summon many witnesses; still the defendants would be either acquitted or given light sentences—by the terms of the struggle—on account of insufficient evidence. Very often, Mandela and the other defendants would turn the trial into one where the government would be sitting in the dock, until the time of the ill-omened Rivonia Trial in which Mandela was sentenced to spend the rest of his life behind bars on charges like the forming of MK and planning a guerrilla war against the state.

Umkhonto we Sizwe (Spear of the Nation) is the ANC armed struggle movement. Mandela formed the organisation when he realised the necessity of moving from a passive struggle to an armed one, as it was the only effective option of struggle left for Africans by the National Party government. The organisation's mission was to carry out acts of sabotage against the state, with an eye to keeping civilian casualties to the minimum. In the stage of formation, Mandela toured the African continent to secure the necessary financial support from friendly governments. He was personally trained in Addis Ababa, but was arrested on returning to South Africa before he could pass on what he learned to other members of the organisation.

Mandela went on two trials; he was found guilty in both and given a life sentence in the Rivonia Trial. He was transferred along with other convicts to Robben Island Prison—or the prison-island—where he became the world's most famous political prisoner and spent the longest prison term in his entire life. Racial discrimination was rife inside the prison just as it was outside. Although Mandela and his comrades were no longer actively involved in the struggle outside, they resolved to carry on their own struggle against the racial discrimination within the prison. In actual fact, they reached a stage when the prison was more run by the prisoners than by guards, even though the prisoners could not achieve that before long years had passed. The Robben Island Prison was known in the struggle as "the University", where freedom fighters would learn from their comrades about the political history of various South African parties and, consequently, correct their erroneous notions. This was a chance for Mandela to refute arguments among political prisoners and others that the Communist Party was actually dominating the ANC, among other fallacies.

Things took a sharp turn during Mandela's incarceration. A great number of the ANC leaders were sent to prison, and those who remained free fled the country. MK escalated its campaign of sabotage and the number of the armed struggle victims was on the rise. In the 1970s, the spirit of popular, angry revolt intensified among the youth in particular, following the 1960s inertia. Other national liberation movements were taking form in the African continent as well.

In the last stage of his imprisonment, Mandela's belief was that the solution to his country's problem is rather political than military. He started considering the need to negotiate with the government, and he chose none but himself to be tasked with that. He believed that "There are times when a leader must move out ahead of the flock, go off in a new direction, confident that he is leading his people the right way." During this time, F.W. de Klerk assumed presidency of the National Party, auguring a new political era.

- South Africa: The End of a Crisis

In Algeria, Mandela was told by his military trainer that, "international public opinion ... is sometimes worth more than a fleet of jet fighters". The case of South Africa was being brought into the world's view following the Sharpeville massacre, in which 99 people were killed and more than 400 injured while demonstrating peacefully. There was an international outcry calling on the ruling National Party to initiate measures that would bring about racial equality. The protests came from the US Department of State, the UN Security Council, foreign governments and international non-governmental organisations and labour unions. With the tensions heightening and the international pressure mounting, foreign capitals started moving out of South Africa, and economic sanctions were imposed by an increasing number of the world's governments. The National Party government could not fool the international community into believing in its mock-amendments or stopping the news of the struggle from coming out.

Following years of heated debate within the ANC over the issue of holding talks with the Apartheid government, Mandela opted for taking the first step and profiting from the favourable international climate, believing in the need to give the struggle a push forward lest the government and the people find themselves stuck in an endless night of injustice, violence and war. The tentative results of the first round of negotiations were the release of political prisoners, lifting the ban on political organisations, lifting the state of emergency, and amending a number of laws and regulations. This led to Mandela's release in February 1990, after twenty-seven years of imprisonment.

Despite Mr Mandela's release, he was not free in the true sense of the word. He was not free to move and live in the neighbourhood he chooses, nor to send his grandchildren to a school of his choice; he was not free to vote or run for a political office in his country. The struggle moved to a new phase, laden with violence and blood, during which Mandela strove to stop his people from slipping into a power conflict. Following huge international pressure, with the ANC unshakably refusing to renounce its beliefs, a day was finally set for the first South African democratic general election: 27 April 1994.

The negotiations between the government and the ANC—now a legitimate popular organisation—were not free of setbacks. Perseverance and renewed attempts eventually led to the prospect of all Africans taking part. Mandela was elected president following huge election campaigns and public mobilisation to become the first African president of the nation. He proposed an objective, down-to-earth work plan, and he often said to the crowds, "Do not expect to be driving a Mercedes the day after the election or swimming in your own backyard pool ... life will not change dramatically, except that you will have increased your self-esteem and become a citizen in your own land. You must have patience. You might have to fight five years for results to show." The new laws demonstrated the new message of the ANC: a message of reconciliation, binding the wounds of the nation, and engendering trust and confidence.

Today, South Africa is still recovering from forms of discrimination on the basis of race, from inequality in power-sharing, in opportunities and the way of life.

- Non-violence as a Strategy, not an Option

Although the prominent freedom fighter Manilal Gandhi started his non-violent campaign in Johannesburg, where he was practising law on 11/9/1906, and despite the ANC's adoption of the non-violence principle in its fight against the Apartheid early on, Mandela and his comrades realised that peaceful resistance was a losing card. They went to propose the establishment of a military wing to the ANC: MK, which Mandela was asked to form and command. Mandela never conceived of non-violence as a magic recipe or a moral principle not to be deviated from, but rather as a strategy of struggle that is demanded by the conditions. Despite his great admiration of Gandhi and Martin Luther King's struggle mechanisms, he finds these methods inapplicable when comparing his country's case to those of both men: "In India, Gandhi had been dealing with a foreign power that ultimately was more realistic and far-sighted. That was not the case with the Afrikaners in South Africa. Non-violent passive resistance is effective as long as your opposition adheres to the same rules as you do. But if peaceful protest is met with violence, its efficiency is at an end. For me, non-violence was not a moral principle but a strategy; there is no moral goodness in using an ineffective weapon." Of King he says, "... the conditions in which Martin Luther King struggled were totally different from my own: the United States was a democracy with constitutional guarantees of equal rights that protected non-violent protest (though there was still

prejudice against blacks); South Africa was a police state with a constitution that enshrined inequality and an army that responded to non-violence with force.” Mandela sees non-violence as a nation-specific strategy, with no guarantee whatsoever that it will be encountered peacefully in our cruel part of the world. Now, at a time when fighting goes on in Iraq, Sudan, Nepal and other places, the need arises for engendering a non-violence culture, without overlooking the contexts where violence can be used, and how to use it when necessary in a way that would minimise human casualties. This is how Mandela and his colleagues projected MK in order to organise violence that would have inevitably erupted against the Apartheid government, and to organise it so to kill as few as possible and inflict the greatest possible damage on the government.

- Useful Lessons for the Middle East

As the conflict intensifies in both Iraq and Lebanon, and one starts to wonder whether the Palestinian question is indeed irresolvable, “Long Walk to Freedom” offers unstated solutions for these cases and others around the world.

In 1994, South Africa did away with the Apartheid regime, and the ANC assumed power to lead the nation through the majority rule, to bind the wounds of the past and seek a brighter future. One underprivileged sector of that society called for one state where equality prevails, notwithstanding the fact that they lived under very harsh conditions in terms of education, healthcare and opportunities, unlike the whites who lived under the best circumstances possible the world over. Hence, a one-state solution whereby each Palestinian enjoys political equality with the Israelis would be the most equitable solution the Palestinians can reach in the long run. Even though the international community has long failed to consider this option, as Israel and its allies show fierce opposition, the awareness of the potency of such solution should prevail in Palestinian quarters.

A researcher in South Africa’s history would not fail to notice a similarity between the modern phase, when the Apartheid policy was enforced in 1948, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict of today, with rumours of dumping the minority in the sea, with oppression and massacres committed against the majority, up to the armed struggle, internal strife and a fight for supremacy in the oppressed society. A researcher will certainly come across a vast array of similar instances between the two cases, and to his mind the one-state solution would sound most well-grounded, a belief that the struggle to achieve this purpose would secure the world’s backing of this just cause.

Mandela wanted to “forget the past and concentrate on building a better future for all” when preparing for the first fair and transparent election in the history of South Africa. An aspiration like this is of the highest value in today’s Arab-Israeli conflict: to set our eyes on the future and work for it, putting aside our differences and tragedies for now in order to reach a solution that is of paramount relevance. South Africa, however, has not forgotten the massacres of the past, and it is today grappling with this past through South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Committee, which aims at healing the wounds inflicted by the Apartheid era. Europe would not have been reunited—and Hiroshima rebuilt—had the peoples of the world remained captive to the past; South Africa would not have achieved political equality either. Unless the peoples of the world bury their differences today, the conflicts will never end.

In the case of Lebanon, sectarian strife and the fight for supremacy have long been stoked, in an actualisation of the French poet Paul Valéry’s words: “War is a conflict between people who do not know each other, being fought on behalf of people who know each other well, but never

fight". Lebanon is in a dire need today for a national unity government that would leave differences behind, with everyone working in the people's interest. Mandela says, "I wanted South Africa to see that I loved even my enemies while I hated the system that turned us against one another." This is a clear message urging us not to fall in the traps set by political systems, but to try and dispose of them instead. This is exactly what the Lebanese people need to do now.

Mandela's autobiography shows that it is possible that an individual or a people might enjoy false freedom, just like he believed in his youth that he was totally free: free to come home late, to go wherever he chose, and marry whoever he wished to. However, with time, it became clear to him that he and his brethren were the furthest from freedom. The United States of America is trying to 'spread democracy' in the Middle East, a democracy with political contribution as its sole pillar, with no regard at all to economic freedom, for example, or other freedoms that true political contribution can not function without. Consequently, the people of the region should decide on which democracy is best for them and then follow on that, instead of taking ready-made or imported recipes from the 'civilised world'.

The process of negotiation in South Africa was started in a climate of self-dependence and without intermediaries; this minimises the potential of other parties furthering their own schemes by taking part in the negotiations. In the same manner, why would Lebanon need an international tribunal when one of its politicians is assassinated when competent Lebanese judges are on hand? Why is there a need for the United States' mediation to put an end to the Arab-Israeli conflict when it is clearly making use of this conflict to secure an exit strategy from Iraq? The international community's help is indispensable for any country; the struggle movement in South Africa itself benefitted from this help through the international sanctions that were imposed on the Apartheid regime. However, this help must not exceed its limits and serve the interests of foreign powers at the expense of those involved in the conflict itself. Accordingly, self-dependence is crucial when solving crises and entering negotiations. It is an important lesson the Middle East can learn from South Africa.

- Mandela: The True Freedom Fighter

Suffering is the destiny of every true freedom fighter. It is something he accepts and adapts to as part of the struggle. Mandela did not fail to mention this part, either while he was in prison, on trial, away from family or being denied his freedom for long periods of time, not to mention the heinous racial discrimination practised against him.

In his autobiography, Mandela describes the inner conflict that plagued him all over the years, the conflict between his two duties: the one towards his family, and the other towards his nation. At every stage he would be wondering: did he choose the right path when he left his mother to join the ANC, when he gave up his normal life as husband and father? There are also times when the government denied him the opportunity to take part in his familial duties while in Robben Island prison, such as attending his daughter's wedding ceremony, burying his mother and eldest son. Furthermore, the struggle had to do with his two wives' suffering; he divorced the first because his life as a freedom fighter stood in stark contrast to the simple, domestic life she long dreamed of. As for his second wife, it added to his suffering to know that she was being continuously harassed by the government during his imprisonment years. His children grew up in his absence, and when he was released, he was not their father. He was the father of the nation.

Mandela's struggle for freedom made a fugitive of him, an outlaw and a monk when he was a life-loving man. Despite all this, he embraces his nation's cause at the expense of his personal interest. At Rivonia, he does not back up even when the possibility of getting a death sentence crops up. Together with his comrades, they decided not to try and appeal, he also rejected the generous offers of the government to release him, and he told the people in a speech delivered by his daughter Zindzi while he was in prison: "I cherish my own freedom dearly, but I care even more for your freedom."

Mandela spent twenty-seven years in a jail that was created to rob man of his humanity, yet he remained hopeful, proud of himself, facing everyone with dignity and honour that stem from his resistance to fear and standing up to injustice. Even at times when his confidence in the entire humanity was ebbing, he did not give up, because he saw inevitable death in surrendering to despair.

Mandela is the true incarnation of his words: "Freedom is not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it". He is no less greater than Che Guevara, the world's hero of the left who fought to achieve social justice for the peoples of Latin America, or Gandhi, who strove to help India secure its independence from Great Britain in the 1920s, or Martin Luther King and the Algerian freedom fighters, among many others whose names were not recorded by history, heroes who fought to bring freedom to their peoples and to free them from oppression.

- The Influence of Mandela's Book on my Life

"The Long Walk to Freedom" is one of the most hope-inspiring, reinforcing books I have ever read. The book succeeds in carrying the reader through time and giving him the feeling that he is side by side with Mandela in his struggle for freedom, and to challenge the flaws that could dissuade him from taking the course of freedom alongside that great leader. The book also teaches the reader that there is nothing impossible under the sun, that patience and perseverance are vital conditions to pave the way to success.

Through my reading I learned that humans, despite their differences, be they racial or intellectual, can cooperate to achieve a one higher goal and make it true. The book taught me that life is full of love, that the feelings of hate against others, which certain people instil in their children's hearts, can be turned to feelings of love and mercy. "...for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite" Mr Mandela says.

I learned that the path of struggle is fraught with risks and is unpredictable. Man sets out on this path with full readiness to sacrifice whatever it takes to achieve his goal, backed by faith and a vision that augurs a better future, if man succeeds. Mr Mandela's experience also gave me hope that his efforts will not go vainly.

Mr Mandela's book is replete with lessons and examples that ring a bell with my people and nation's experience. As he says, "But I have discovered the secret that after climbing a great hill, one only finds that there are many more hills to climb." Hence, the struggle for freedom is a never-ending one.

Mandela's book has been a great incentive to me on the way of struggle for man's freedom in this world, a source from which I derived much hope and knowledge of a singular experience in human history, South Africa's unique experience of struggle for freedom.